

“I Do Remember How It Smelled Heavenly”: Mormon Aspects of May Swenson’s Poetry

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ANY DISCUSSION OF MORMON CULTURE or doctrine in the work of nationally prominent American poet May Swenson must begin with the caveat that Swenson, for virtually all of her adult life, was not a believing Mormon. She rejected Mormonism when she was in college, moved to New York City a few years after graduating from Utah State University, and never looked back. Nevertheless, she was raised in a devout Mormon family, her parents having emigrated from Sweden to live with the Saints. She learned Mormon teachings at home and attended church meetings weekly throughout her childhood and youth. She maintained lifelong affection for her parents and eight brothers and sisters, and occasionally came to Utah to visit them. Mormonism shaped her attitudes and perceptions both consciously and unconsciously. And because her poetry rises directly from her life experience—her interests, her study, her thought, her travels—she could not help but respond to Mormon culture and beliefs in some of her poems.

In these clear-eyed observations—Swenson’s poems are always clear-eyed observations—she responds favorably to some aspects of Mormon culture and doctrine, and she critiques and disapproves of other aspects. Her opinions are always strongly owned and expressed, which independence and firmness are not surprising when one considers Swenson’s life. She had the courage to go to New York as a twenty-three-year-old woman in 1935, live there in great poverty during the height of the Depression so she could learn to write, and persevere in following her dream of becoming a poet although she did not publish a poem for the

next thirteen years. Such experiences developed in Swenson strong personal values and trust in her own judgment, which attitudes inform her poetry.

SWENSON'S CRITIQUE OF MORMON CULTURE

In her poems about aspects of Mormon culture, Swenson handles the Mormon past with respect and affection and looks with a more critical eye at the contemporary Mormon world. Her memories of childhood, as they appear in her poems, are especially rich. In section 3 of the long poem "October," she recalls her father, whose thumb lacked a nail because it had been nicked by a saw:

Dad would pare the fruit from our
orchard in the fall, while Mother
boiled the jars, prepared for
"putting up." Dad used to darn
our socks when we were small,
and cut our hair and toenails.
Sunday mornings, in pajamas, we'd
take turns in his lap. He'd help
bathe us sometimes.¹

This passage expresses the genuine affection Swenson felt for her father and recalls the family life of her childhood with nostalgia and warmth. Though the poem does not specifically identify the Mormon aspects of that childhood, they are suggested by the details Swenson includes—the family's special preparations for Sunday and their attention to fruit preservation as part of a year's food supply. Furthermore, this poem in its entirety has a very religious feel to it. "I do not mean to pray," Swenson says in the poem's next section. "But I am glad for the luck/ of light. Surely it is godly,/ that it makes all things/ begin, and appear, and become/ actual to each other."² A Mormon reader is likely to associate Swenson's memories of her strong, loving Mormon family in the third section with the yearning for religious expression she voices in the fourth.

"Under the Baby Blanket" more directly considers Mormon life by examining a Mormon artifact. The poem is addressed to Swenson's companion Rozanne Knudson, and it is about a baby quilt Knudson's mother made as she awaited her daughter's birth. As the poem opens, forty-seven-year-old Knudson has just returned from a visit with her mother, who has given her the quilt. Swenson describes its "handstitched/ and

1. May Swenson, *Nature: Poems Old and New* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 56.

2. *Ibid.*, 57.

applied" panels with pictures of "12 identical sunbonneted/ little girls, one in each square, in different/ colors of dresses doing six different things."³ Swenson admires the work and skill that went into making the quilt—"every tiny stitch put in with needle and/ thimble," and attributes the quilting to "Relief Society ladies."⁴ The quilt is described as a work of art and more importantly, a mother's blessing to her daughter. In the center panel of the quilt, the sunbonneted little girl reads a book with Rozanne's initial on the cover. Because Rozanne is also a writer, Swenson sees this quilt as "A Matriarchal Blessing, predicting [Rozanne's] future!"⁵ Swenson may intend that statement jokingly, but that she makes it indicates her familiarity with the tradition of Mormon patriarchal blessings and her freedom from the restraints of the contemporary Mormon culture that deny mothers the opportunity to give their children blessings. Swenson has said that many of her poems are "simultaneously serious and funny."⁶ In a small way this poem offers a feminist cultural revision and celebrates the beauty and skill of Mormon women's quilt-making.

Affection for the Mormon past and reservations about the Mormon present also appear in the poem "Summerfall,"⁷ which describes the demolition by explosion of the old Hotel Newhouse in downtown Salt Lake City. Swenson uses architecture to compare the dignity of purpose, the grace and graciousness of what she calls "an early, honest, work-proud era," with the proliferating Mormon materialism of the current generation. Of that earlier architecture and time, Swenson says, "All will be flattened. Graciousness, out of date,/ must go, in instantaneous shock." Her prediction of the future, appearing a few lines later, has proven to be most prophetic: "Prompt to come, ye Saints,/ your condominiums, high-rise business, boosted/ economy, new cash flow." Swenson's respect for her Mormon heritage did not keep her from examining and judging the Mormon world as she saw it.

Swenson particularly finds fault with the current Mormon practice of unquestioning obedience to authority. In her poem "The Elect"⁸ she criticizes the effects of such a system on those who are empowered by it:

Under the splendid chandeliers
the august heads are almost all

3. May Swenson, *In Other Words* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 12.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. Karla Hammond, "An Interview With May Swenson: July 14, 1978," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 7 (Fall/Winter 1978): 71.

7. Swenson, *In Other Words*, 22.

8. *Ibid.*, 62.

fragile, gray, white-haired or bald
against the backs of thronelike chairs.

They meet in formal membership
to pick successors to their seats,
having eaten the funeral meats,
toasted the names on the brass strips

affixed behind them, tier on tier,
on chairs like upright coffin tops.
When a withered old head drops,
up is boosted a younger's career.

The chamber is ancient and elite,
its lamps pour down a laureate gold.
Beyond the windows blue and cold
winter twilight stains the street,

as up from the river the wind blows
over slabs of a steep graveyard,
the names under snow. A last award:
to be elected one of those.

Most readers would identify this poem, with its skilled "In Memoriam" stanzas, as describing academia—an Ivy League school like Harvard, perhaps, which is located on the Charles River and is surrounded by very old churches and graveyards. But the poem's language and images suggest an alternative reading for a Mormon audience.

Swenson felt even more strongly about the way that unquestioned authority affects those who are subject to it. Several of her poems imply that, in the people on whom it is wielded, a tradition of strong authority, especially when combined with religious certainty, requires such conformity that it results in unthinking obedience and a mindless mediocrity. Swenson's 1982 Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poem "Some Quadrangles" seems harsh in its discussion of her fellow students at Utah State. This poem compares the kind of students developed at various universities with the kind of quad available to those students. This is what Swenson says about Utah State:

We competed—check this!—
we competed to be good. Most of us did. . . .
"Good student"
didn't mean brilliant scholar, original mind,
or even eagerness to learn. It meant programmed
to please—not so much our teachers, but mainly
our peers. Our goal was to fit the mold that

seemed assigned by those around us. We used our quad of perfectly barbered grass only for crossing from class to class. And we walked on the crosswalks while walking and crossing. Naturally, no foot should be set on the carpet. Might wear it out! I do remember how it smelled heavenly on dewy mornings after a mowing, which sometimes left unlopped the subversive heads of a dandelion or two. . . .⁹

The clipped lawn "smelled heavenly," but Swenson makes us wonder how heavenly it actually was. The image of the surviving dandelion heads is significant. I think Swenson must have considered herself one of those few dandelions whose head wasn't lopped off (in other words, who retained an independent mind despite strong pressure to conform). And the dandelions that didn't survive the mowing recall those whose authenticity is destroyed. The perfect quad, untouched by the feet of students who crossed it only at allowed crosswalks, is a metaphor for the Utah Mormon culture that requires such deference to authority and such conformity that it discourages excellence and originality. The advice to students with which Swenson ends this poem shows how strongly she reacted against that pressure to conform:

Listen, there's just one "Don't," one "Keep Off,"
one "Keep Away From"—and I don't mean "the Grass."
It is: *Don't be a clone*. Don't do what others
do. Because what they do, they do because others do. . . .¹⁰

Swenson is not leading students to wild-eyed irresponsible abandon; she advises them to resist both liberal and conservative conformity:

Not to be robotic, fix-focused on that straight
slit up the middle of some cat's eye. *Not* to be
either knee-jerked or Lotus-folded into the annealed
mob of spastic hot punk-rock clones, or else
upstairs among the pawky cornball Majority Morals. . . .
Get up, get out on the fresh edge
of things, away from the wow and flutter. Stand alone.
Take a breath of your own. Choose the wide-angle
view. That's something, maybe, you can begin to
learn to do . . .¹¹

9. *Ibid.*, 73-74.

10. *Ibid.*, 75.

11. *Ibid.*, 76.

What Swenson advocates here is actually moral agency, a central principle of Mormon thought. It is one of life's ironies that her own exercise of that agency led her to examine Mormon culture, and while admiring some aspects of that culture (including the strong family life she herself benefitted from and the pioneer tradition of work and dignity), to criticize and reject aspects of the culture that she experienced as limiting.

MORMON DOCTRINE IN SWENSON'S POEMS

I began this essay with the assumption that because Swenson was not a practicing Mormon, she would resist Mormon doctrines and that such resistance would appear in her poems. In other words, I thought Swenson's engagement with Mormon teachings would be primarily to oppose them. Indeed, I have found several poems that disparage basic practices or question prohibited behaviors. But more often Swenson seems not to have rejected Mormon concepts but to have considered them carefully. While her interpretation of these concepts cannot be considered orthodox, she reinvents them in the philosophical questions she asks and answers in her poems.

To begin with what Swenson rejects, she seems to have been particularly annoyed with the Mormonism practiced by her mother, who, the poems indicate, was pious and rigorous in her observances. The poem "Nature" says of Margaret Swenson, "Mother, eighty-one, fasted five days/ and went to Temple. Mormon, her creed/ eternal life, she fell/ on the kitchen floor unconscious."¹² Swenson comments no more on her mother's actions, but the juxtaposition of her fasting, her temple attendance, and her belief in eternal life with her falling on the kitchen floor suggests some judgment against her piety, or at least implies that her excesses of piety are foolish. Another poem about Margaret Swenson's death, "That the Soul May Wax Plump,"¹³ repeats the criticism:

Mother's work before she died was self-purification,
 a regimen of near starvation, to be worthy to go
 to Our Father, Whom she confused (or, more aptly, fused)
 with our father, in Heaven long since. She believed
 in evacuation, an often and fierce purgation,
 meant to teach the body to be hollow, that the soul
 may wax plump.

The irony of the poem is that, because of such rigorous denial of self, the most ecstatic moment of her mother's life was the moment when she died, which Swenson describes as almost orgasmic:

12. Swenson, *Nature*, 79.

13. May Swenson, *New and Selected Things Taking Place* (Boston: Little Brown, 1978), 51.

Throat and rectum

sang together, a galvanic spasm, hiss of ecstasy.
 Then, a flat collapse. Legs and arms flung wide,
 like that female Spanish saint slung by the ankles
 to a cross, her mouth stayed open in a dark O. So,
 her vigorous soul whizzed free. On the undertaker's slab, she
 lay, youthful, cool, triumphant, with a long smile.

Such abandon Swenson's mother seems only to have experienced in death, never in life. At the poem's beginning, Swenson calls her "My dumpy little mother" and says that when she is in her casket "dressed/ in Eden's green apron, organdy bonnet on" (that is, when she is back in the church's control, wearing her temple robes), "she shrank, grew short again, and yellow." This poem may reflect a tension between Swenson and her mother as much as between Swenson and Mormon doctrine, but there are many other poems with evidence of Swenson's resisting the religious strictures of Mormonism.

Swenson particularly rejects the imposition of religious behavior on her. In "Sunday in the Country," for example, nature itself seems to require that Swenson worship. The poem is replete with religious imagery (though not specifically Mormon imagery) attached to objects in the natural world. Swenson suffers from "The sun's incessant blessing," and "Sky,/ deep and accusing in its blue" that "scrapes/ [Swenson's] conscience like a nail."¹⁴ She says, "Corporeal self's too shapeful for this manger./ I'm mesmerized by trumpet sun/ funneling hallelujah to my veins."¹⁵ In this poem, so far, Swenson is trapped, spellbound by the heaviness of religion, its weight and its guilt. That the "corporeal self" is unsuited to this worship service is telling; Swenson resents and resists the denial of appetite and body that religious life requires. She is relieved of the burdens of "worship" when

. . . at the tabernacle's back, a blurt
 guffaw is heard. An atheistic stranger calls
 a shocking word. That wakes the insurrection! . . .
 A black and
 impudent Voltairean crow has spoiled
 the sacrament. And I can rise and go.¹⁶

It is interesting that Swenson is released from the guilt of the religious experience by the noise of an unbeliever, "an atheistic stranger," a "Voltairean crow" that comes into the "tabernacle." If the religion is not true,

14. Swenson, *Nature*, 24.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 24-25.

one need not abide by its strictures against the pleasures of "the corporeal self."

I cannot help but see this poem as Swenson's resistance to religious prohibitions against the expression of sexuality, and especially against homosexual sexuality. The poem "Her Early Work"¹⁷ suggests some of the frustrations Swenson faced in her early life because of her homosexuality:

Talked to cats and dogs,
to trees, and to strangers.
To one loved, talked through
layers of masks.
To this day we can't know
who was addressed,
or ever undressed.

The poem speaks of "Wild and heathen scents/ of shame or sin" that "hovered since childhood," which feelings account for Swenson's discomfort in the religious atmosphere of "Sunday in the Country."

Two other poems can be interpreted to strongly oppose religious prohibitions that deny human sexual satisfaction and fulfillment. The first is "Wild Water"¹⁸:

Insidious cruelty is this
that will allow the heart
a scent of wild water
in the arid land—
that holds out the cup
but to withdraw the hand.

Then says to the heart: Be glad
that you have beheld the font
where lies requitement,
and identified your thirst.
Now, heart, take up your desert;
this spring is cursed.

Granted, nothing in this poem directly connects it to the situation of a homosexual in the Mormon church. The "wild water" may be a metaphor for any unreturned love. But it is a particularly poignant metaphor for the absolute desert offered to a gay or lesbian Mormon, who, feeling love and sexual attraction, must repress such feelings for his or her entire life

17. Swenson, *In Other Words*, 58.

18. May Swenson, *The Love Poems of May Swenson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 48.

in order to remain in the church, without hope of any human sexual expression ever.

The second poem that questions the wisdom of denying the body's needs for sexual fulfillment is "Stone or Flame."¹⁹ Echoing Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice," this poem asks about the costs of both sexual denial and sexual expression:

Shall we pray to be delivered
from the crying of the flesh
Shall we live like the lizard
in the frost of denial

Or shall we offer the nerve-buds
of our bodies
to be nourished (or consumed)
in the sun of love

Shall we wrap ourselves rigid
against desire's contagion
in sarcophagi of safety
insulate ourselves
from both fire and ice

To this point, the poem seems to favor sexual expression, as that alternative seems better than living like a lizard or wrapping oneself into a sarcophagus and may, the poem suggests, nourish rather than consume. But the rest of the poem seems quite even-handed in expressing the pain of either choice:

And will the vessel of the heart
stay warm
if our veins be drained of passion
Will the spirit rise virile
from the crematory ash

Shall we borrow
from the stone
relentless peace
or from the flame
exquisite suicide?

19. *Ibid.*, 49.

That this poem doesn't offer a choice without life-threatening consequences also seems to connect it to the plight of a homosexual in the Mormon church. There can be sexual expression without destruction for married heterosexual Mormons, so long as they express their sexuality with their marriage partner. Indeed, Mormon doctrine celebrates the body as essential in helping us to develop the characteristics of the gods. But sexual expression for gay and lesbian Mormons (or, we are told, for any but those fortunate married heterosexual Mormons) will bring destruction. It is interesting that the poem seems to affirm that such sexual activity is sinful by asking about how it will affect the spirit. Burning is the poem's metaphor for sexual experience, and the poem asks: "Will the spirit rise virile/ from the crematory ash."

But then this poem emphasizes a truth generally omitted from Mormon sermons on proper sexual behavior: there is also a cost for denying the flesh, and that cost is, the poem tells us, a kind of dehumanization, to "live like the lizard/ in the frost of denial," and to lose the warmth from one's heart. Neither choice for a gay or lesbian is happy; the "relentless peace" of the stone and the "exquisite suicide" of the flame are both metaphors for death. And from the official Mormon perspective, these are, tragically, the only options.

Despite these examples of resistance, Swenson's poetry more often considers than rejects major concepts of Mormon doctrine. In a 1978 interview she said, "I'm on a search, although I didn't deliberately set out to make a search in poetry. I have a philosophical bent which harks back to a religious background that I abandoned. Other poets may not be on any search other than into their own selves. But I've been on a search into the universe and the human mind."²⁰ The philosophical questions of Swenson's poetry are, in general, the questions about the purpose and meaning of life at the heart of the Mormon plan of salvation. In general, Swenson either affirms or in some way reinterprets Mormon doctrine as she answers those questions.

Swenson describes her search to understand the meaning of life. In "You Are,"²¹ she says:

once I thought
to seek the limits
of all being

I believed
in my own eyes' seeing
then

to find pattern purpose aim
thus forget death
or forgive it

20. Hammond, 75.

21. Swenson, *Love Poems*, 41-43.

If this poem is a true report, Swenson sets out to find the meaning of human existence, which certainly is the basic question of any philosophical quest. But notice that she begins with the assumption that there is "pattern purpose aim," that life is not just a series of random, uncaused phenomena, and that a search can lead to understanding that will make death an acceptable part of life. It is likely that those assumptions come from Swenson's schooling in Mormon tenets, which affirm a purpose in human existence and an eternal pattern of life that make death a natural transition rather than a horrible annihilation and final separation.

The long poem "Banyan" from Swenson's final book, *In Other Words* (95-128), enacts the quest she describes in "You Are." The voice and major character of that poem is Tonto, a "coarse-haired Woolly Monkey" (104) who leaves his home in human society and goes to live in the banyan tree. Passage through the tree becomes a metaphor for passage through life, and Tonto is always trying to understand it. He says:

I had expected to turn a corner,
to find ahead, within range, a view
that would change the aspect of everything
so far seen and experienced—that would explain
everything, and show how it all combined as a Whole. . . .
"What and where is the purpose?" I persisted.²²

To believe or hope that life has "pattern purpose aim" almost presupposes a belief in God or some form of intelligence higher than the human, to which humans are trying to gain access in order to understand the meaning of their earthly experiences. Although Swenson rarely mentions God in them, she wrote many poems considering the limitations of human perception and suggesting that there may be greater systems humans don't have access to. "The Poplar's Shadow,"²³ for example, is about Swenson's childhood memory of a poplar tree, the shadow of which she saw as "the quill of a great pen/ dark upon the lawn." Now she sees the same shape in a pigeon's feather she finds in a city park, which discovery causes her to wonder:

Starting at here,
and superposing then,
I wait for when.
What shapes will appear?
Will great birds swing
over me like gongs?
The poplar plume belongs
to what enormous wing?

22. Swenson, *In Other Words*, 115.

23. Swenson, *Nature*, 18.

The poem "Flying Home from Utah" expresses a similar theme. As Swenson's plane climbs, she sees fields as "fitted pieces of a floor,/ tan and green tiles that get smoother, smaller, the higher we fly,"²⁴ lakes as "Heel-shaped dents of water,"²⁵ and hills as "rubbed felt, crumpled bumps/ of antlers pricking from young bucks' heads."²⁶ The change in her perception as she climbs causes her to reflect, in "the room of [her] mind,"²⁷ on

A sprawled leaf, many-fingered, its radial
ridges limber, green—but curled,
tattered, pocked, the brown palm

nibbled by insects, nestled in by worms:
One leaf of a tree that's one tree of a forest,
that's the branch of the vein of a leaf

of a tree.²⁸

The transformation of the forest tree to a tiny capillary of a leaf again suggests to Swenson that humans are limited to comprehend only what is within our own system and that there may be greater systems beyond our knowledge or comprehension. The ending of the poem uses language that recalls Mormon scripture:

... Perpetual worlds
within, upon, above the world, the world
a leaf within a wilderness of worlds.²⁹

This passage of poetry sounds much like the passage of Mormon scripture in which God speaks to Moses in the Pearl of Great Price:

And worlds without number have I created; and I also created them for mine own purpose; . . . For behold, there are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power. And there are many that now stand, and innumerable are they unto man; but all things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them (Moses 1:33, 35).

24. *Ibid.*, 175.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 176.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 176-77.

29. *Ibid.*, 177.

In both "The Poplar's Shadow" and "Flying Home from Utah," Swenson creates metaphors that suggest greater realms. Particularly when one considers the similar language, it seems reasonable to look for the source of Swenson's speculations in her Mormon religious background.

Swenson also calls for humans to try to achieve a change in perspective that will allow a different vision. In a poem whose title is also its first line, she says,

LET US PREPARE

to get beyond the organic
 for surely there is something else
 to which it is an impediment an opaque pod
 What if it is sight that blinds
 hearing that deafens
 touch that makes us numb?³⁰

This poem is indented on the left to create a white space that looks like some angled surface—a train or an arrow, perhaps—forcing its way through the words. The poem, which has an oracular tone, ends with the admonition: "Let us prepare to bare ourselves outside the gibbet-hood/ of the world/ without excuse of flesh or apology of blood." Again the assumptions on which this poem is based fit well with Mormon doctrine—that human reasoning and sensory observation are both inadequate to a transcendent understanding, and that greater knowledge may be available to us beyond this life. The poem suggests that if we could get beyond our mortal limitations, more knowledge would be available.

A very interesting poem that actually enacts the changes of perception called for in "Let Us Prepare" is the poem "The Surface"³¹:

First I saw the surface,
 then I saw it flow,
 then I saw the underneath.

In gradual light below
 I saw a kind of room,
 the ceiling was a veil,

a shape swam there
 slow, opaque and pale.
 I saw enter by a shifting corridor

30. Swenson, *New and Selected*, 221.

31. Swenson, *Nature*, 198.

other blunt bodies
 that sank toward the floor.
 I tried to follow deeper

with my avid eye.
 Something changed the focus:
 I saw the sky,

a glass between inverted trees.
 Then I saw my face.
 I looked until a cloud

flowed over that place.
 Now I saw the surface
 broad to its rim,

here gleaming, there opaque
 far out, flat and dim.
 Then I saw it was an Eye:

I saw the Wink that slid
 from underneath the surface
 before it closed its lid.

This poem, which is, of course, about a lake or pond with fish in it, registers several different “realms” that Swenson perceives as she observes. First, she sees the entire lake as a lake—the surface of things. Then, she realizes that the lake is flowing, moving, and that she can see beneath the surface. In describing what is below the surface, “a kind of room,” it may be coincidence that Swenson uses terms that have particular meaning to Mormons, but perhaps not. The room’s ceiling is a veil, an apt metaphor to describe the juncture of water and sky. But in Mormon terms, we speak of “the veil being thin” when we feel in communication with God or departed loved ones, and we speak of death as “passing through the veil.” And although Swenson never received her temple endowments, she may have imagined it in her description of the “kind of room” with a veil for a ceiling, and in which she saw “a shape” swim, “slow, opaque and pale” and “other blunt bodies” that entered “by a shifting corridor.”

The third realm the poem creates is the reflection of the sky and Swenson’s own face on the surface. This has the effect of again changing and broadening the perspective by which Swenson sees and also including her in all the systems the poem has created. Then the poem concludes with a transcendent change in perception—that lake becomes an Eye

with a capital E. Could that Eye recall the All-Seeing Eye above the doors of the Salt Lake temple and present in so much early Mormon art and architecture? The All-Seeing Eye, like Swenson's "Eye," is a symbol of God. That Swenson's deity is playful enough to "Wink" seems a fitting touch. She would certainly perceive God as having a sense of humor as fine as her own.

To summarize, this poem shows how a change in perception allows one to enter a variety of different realms (or systems), and that by altering our perceptions to understand each system, we have a greater possibility of reaching the vision of God (that is, both an awareness of God and an ability to see as God sees). The poem compares rather convincingly with the Mormon doctrine of eternal progression—that humans are capable of growing and progressing to become like God, that there are "estates" to pass through in this process of growth, and that one's understanding will increase as one learns and learns to abide by the laws of each system.

Considering Swenson's re-invention of the doctrine of eternal progression, it is not surprising that her poems also show interest in the continuation of life and growth after death. In "Camping in Madera Canyon," she says, "Night hid this day. What sunrise may it be/ the dark to? What wider light ripens to dawn/ behind familiar light?"³² Owls in this poem are given a sort of angelic identity; Swenson tells us that Apaches believed owls to be the ghosts of their ancestors. The poem ends:

The whiskered owls are here, close by,
in the tops of the pines, invisible and radiant,
as we, blind and numb, awaken—our just-born
eyes and ears, our feet that walk—
as brightness bathes the road.³³

The implication is that the humans of the poem, newly born, just coming into the "life" of the new day, don't yet have the capacity to see the owls, although the owls are nearby, but that this day might be night to a greater day in which they will learn to see the owls.

The same impetus drives the poem "Nature," which, as we have already considered, is about the death of Swenson's mother. The poem imagines death as "a large gut" swallowing us slowly "Until the last sink, where mouth says,/ 'Here's a Mouth!'"³⁴ But the poem goes on to review a film Swenson has recently seen of a birth. Swenson describes the birth as a "wet head, twisting free/ of a vomiting Mouth."³⁵ Thus the Mouth of birth and the Mouth of death may be the same mouth. Death may simply swallow us here and spew us out elsewhere in another birth.

32. Swenson, *Nature*, 119-20.

33. *Ibid.*, 120.

34. *Ibid.*, 78.

35. *Ibid.*, 79.

Both of these poems can be seen as metaphoric representations of the Mormon doctrine of eternal progression. The well-known Mormon epigram says, "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become." Such a close connection between humans and deity, such a spur always to seek knowledge and growth must have been important to May Swenson; I find these to be the Mormon doctrines that entered her being and became her own.

I conclude by returning to the poem "Banyan," the last poem in the last book Swenson published during her lifetime. Tonto the monkey travels through the banyan with a cockatoo named Blondi, whose talk is mostly to recite passages of literature she's learned in the library where she lives, and, in addition, to repeat what she's heard people say. Blondi ends the poem by reciting her answer to Tonto's question:

The purpose of life is
 To find the purpose of life
 To find the purpose
 Of life is
 The purpose
 Life is
 To find.³⁶

This seems to be Swenson's final message, the truth by which she lived her life. Though it may sound like circular reasoning, it is based on the assumption that one's search for the purpose of life will be rewarding. "Life is/ To find." Such hope, such faith, must have been instilled in Swenson by her Mormon training, where she learned that humans "are that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25) and that "all . . . things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7).

36. Swenson, *In Other Words*, 128.